

The Medical Advisor: The Complete Guide to Alternative and Conventional Treatments. Alexandria, VA: Time-Life, 1996. 1,152 p. \$39.95. ISBN: 0-8094-9737-2.

Dozens of books on complementary therapies are available in libraries and bookstores. They are wildly uneven in quality. Some cite studies published in scientific journals to back up their claims; others cite self-published pamphlets and obscure newsletters. Some accuse the Food and Drug Administration of masterminding a conspiracy to suppress cancer cures; others merely want to help the reader find some relief from headaches. They usually lack information on the treatment of diseases except in general terms of improving overall health status—not a very satisfying approach if you are already sick.

The Medical Advisor is different. It will fit nicely in the gap on your shelf between the *American Medical Association Encyclopedia of Medicine* [1] and *Alternative Medicine: The Definitive Guide* [2]. It is a book for those of us who ultimately rely on our doctors with their prescription pads and scalpels, but are looking for an edge—an herbal tea, maybe, or yoga—and believe that lifestyle changes do affect health. You can recommend it as a good general medical reference without worrying that you have encouraged someone to give up insulin in favor of bitter melon.

The first part of *The Medical Advisor* briefly describes both conventional and alternative practitioners and therapies. Other alternative medicine books [3–5] have far more detailed descriptions and cover more fringe areas. There is a very short discussion on choosing a practitioner with very little advice on spotting a quack (either conventional or alternative). The second section is an overview of health throughout the life cycle. The guidelines are conventional: immunizations and prenatal care are

recommended; home birthing is not mentioned. The third section covers emergencies and first aid and is similar to other first aid books with clear illustrations and instructions. Another 140-page section briefly summarizes more than 800 conventional and natural medicines, including indications, side effects, and precautions.

The 800 pages devoted to "Ailments and Options" (alphabetically, Abdominal Pain to Yeast Infections) make this book valuable. These address both general symptoms and specific conditions. Symptoms such as abdominal or chest pain are discussed, and a chart is used to sort out the merely annoying from the potentially dangerous. For example, a burning pain in the lower chest or upper abdomen, particularly after eating, is probably indigestion or heartburn, and an antacid is recommended. A referral to entries under heartburn indicates chamomile and nux vomica as possible alternative therapies. Sudden chest pain with shortness of breath, however, may be a heart attack or blood clot and the reader is instructed to call 911.

Each specific ailment is discussed in two- to six-page sections that use the standard format of a highlighted column of information followed by description, causes, treatment (first conventional, then alternative), and prevention. The first column indicates when to call a doctor. Heartburn, for example, when accompanied by difficulty swallowing, when aggravated by exercise, or when chronic, may indicate a more serious problem. Unlike many alternative medicine books that vaguely refer to "health care practitioners," *The Medical Advisor* says "doctor" when it means medical doctor, and "homeopath," "acupuncturist," or "nutritionist" when referring to other practitioners. The advice to call a doctor or 911 is immediately apparent and absolutely clear.

Conventional treatments usually

include surgery or prescription medications, and everything else is considered an alternative. For many conditions, the difference is artificial. While Ayurvedic and herbal therapies for high cholesterol will be new to many readers, the diet, stress-reduction, and exercise recommendations are very similar to what the American Heart Association has recommended for years, and are standard advice from today's physicians. Dean Ornish's program of stricter lifestyle changes is barely mentioned. Entries for chronic conditions such as ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), multiple sclerosis, osteoporosis, and Crohn's disease all include the kind of nutrition and self-help advice that may not be scientifically proven to work, but is passed around among support group members and does seem to help people. Other recommendations are the kind of advice you can get from your mother, and often from your doctor: vaporizers for bronchitis, ginseng for menopause, and ginger for nausea. Therapies that most people would consider truly alternative—bee stings for multiple sclerosis, chelation therapy for atherosclerosis, shark cartilage for cancer—are discussed, but no claims of efficacy are made. There are none of the inspirational personal success stories that count as proof in many alternative medicine books. For serious conditions such as diabetes and cancer, conventional medicine by real doctors is clearly recommended, with alternatives playing a supportive role.

The format is clear and easy to use, the illustrations are well done, the appendices include national health and credentialing organizations as well as some online sources, and the indexing will get you where you want to go quickly. In contrast to many alternative medicine books which cover only a few conditions, here you can look up phlebitis, shingles, lupus, pancreatitis, or Rocky Mountain spot-

ted fever and find treatment advice rather than vague recommendations to eat right and keep your immune system up. While some books dedicated to specific modalities cover a wide range of diseases [6, 7], of the books footnoted below, only *Alternative Medicine: The Definitive Guide* is comparable in its A to Z coverage of common health problems, and it deliberately excludes all conventional medicine.

The Medical Advisor is a reliable, comprehensive reference, highly recommended for home use and all consumer health collections. It will not appeal to the reader who believes that apple juice will dissolve

his gallstones or hopes to entrust her breast lump to a psychic surgeon. It will provide the reader with accurate information and an introduction to complementary therapies without encouraging practices that could have life-threatening consequences.

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5. COLLINGE W. *The American Holistic Health Association complete guide to alternative medicine*. New York: Warner Books, 1995.

6. MURRAY MT. *Encyclopedia of natural medicine*. Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1991.

7. LOCKIE A. *Family guide to homeopathy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.